

AG, cops endorse federal CHIP plan

By ANGELA BRANDT – Helena Independent Record Staff Writer - 05/30/07

Just as shown in the latest campaign of Montana Meth Project ads, methamphetamine use not only impacts the addicts themselves but also those surrounding them.

Local law enforcement officials are looking to help quell the effects of the drug on youth by expanding the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP).

Improving coverage is a proactive step in reducing crime down the road, according to the officials.

State Attorney General Mike McGrath, Helena Police Chief Troy McGee and Lewis and Clark County Sheriff Cheryl Liedle met Tuesday with members of the national anti-crime organization Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. They plan to urge Congress to support the insurance program.

"The problems caused by meth don't stop when we lock someone up," McGrath said. "All too often, we see Montana families with three generations of drug addiction. If we hope to break the cycle of addiction, neglect and abuse, these children need coverage and treatment for their mental and emotional problems."

The law enforcement officials said they support Montana Sen. Max Baucus's efforts to win \$50 billion over five years for SCHIP.

Although the program now provides limited mental health coverage, the Senate Finance Committee, chaired by Baucus, is considering a provision to the SCHIP reauthorization bill to make coverage equal to that of other medical services.

If improved and expanded, according to McGee, SCHIP could help "secondary victims" of meth use — those related to meth users — by providing services that ensure their behavioral, emotional and mental health problems are identified and treated.

While on the field, officers see many criminals who might not be in that situation had they had help with their issues when younger, he added.

In the program, for which the current year's funding expires Sept. 30, states like Montana use the money, along with their own funds, to subsidize health coverage for families with incomes that are too high to qualify for Medicaid, but too low to afford insurance through the private sector.

According to vice president of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Jeff Kirsch, about 32,000 children in the state do not have health coverage. SCHIP provides health services to an estimated 13,000 children in Montana's low-income households who do not qualify for Medicaid.

While Kirsch realizes that law enforcement and children's insurance may seem like an odd mix, he said investing in help for kids with mental problems stemming from drug-related abuse keeps youth on the right track and away from crime. This is the best for public safety and cheaper in the long run, he said.

Liedle agreed.

Catching and treating mental illness in children will eliminate detention costs later on, she said. The idea is to head off the problems while they are present in young kids in hopes of stopping them from entering into a life of crime and drugs, Liedle added.

Even though methamphetamine production is down in the state, McGrath said, 50 percent of adult inmates are still incarcerated due to meth-related crimes. In addition, he said, about 52 percent of Montana children placed in foster care due to their caretakers' issues stemming from methamphetamine use.

Research conducted by the Fight Crime organization shows that children who are victims of abuse and neglect are more likely than other children to become violent adults and those children who are screened and treated for behavioral and aggression problems are less likely to commit crimes as adults.

“Troubled kids need access to treatment early to diagnose and treat their problems before they hurt themselves or someone else. We must expand the State Children’s Health Insurance Program to make sure these kids get the treatment they need,” Liedle said.

Liedle, McGee and McGrath, are among more than 3,000 law enforcement leaders and victims of violence who are members of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, which is headquartered in Washington, D.C. The organization boasts 25 members in Montana, Kirsch said.